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ABSTRACT

Addressing areas of conflict between parents and young children, this study reports the results of interviews with parents about parent/child conflict that occurs in such natural settings as the home, the supermarket, and during visits to grandparents. Specifically, the investigation is concerned with three broad issues: (1) the identification of areas of conflict or argument between parents and their children as perceived by parents; (2) the hypothesis that conflict or argument between parents and young children occurs in the areas of food and its consumption, television viewing, the daily use of clothes and their initial selection, bedtimes, and toys; and (3) the identification of additional areas of conflict. Initially discussed are conflict, compliance, and power relationships from the perspectives of developmental psychology and sociolinguistics. Subsequent discussion, from a post-structuralist orientation, focuses on the issues of power, child compliance, and the ways persons are positioned as individuals in society. Interview data disclosed that the themes of food, clothing, television viewing, bedtimes, and toys were sources of conflict and noncompliance. However, the reconceptualization of the problem of parent/child conflict in terms of the ways in which discourse constructs relationships suggests that much more is happening in conflict situations than simple rule-breaking and noncompliance. (RH)

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A PILOT STUDY OF AREAS OF PARENT AND CHILD CONFLICT

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The observation and interpretation of conflict or argument between parents and young children in naturalistic settings is not well documented in sociological frameworks. Analysis of the topics or behaviour that cause arguments between parents and children in such settings has also received little attention. Genishi and Di Paolo (1983; 49) acknowledge that from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, work concerning theoretical and methodological problems in studying children's discourse is just beginning. My research intention is to help remedy this lack. To this end a reconceptualisation of the problem of parent/child conflict in terms of the ways in which discourse constructs relationships is needed. In sociological terms, this is a post structuralist project.

This paper is about areas of conflict between parents and young children, and is based on the premise that children are constantly positioned in power relationships with their parents. The paper reports the results of interviews with parents about parent/child conflict that occurs in naturalistic settings such as the home, the supermarket and while visiting grandparents. 1 The paper is concerned with three broad issues. The first is the identification of areas of conflict or argument between parents and their children as perceived by parents. Secondly the paper confirms the hypothesis that conflict or argument between parents and young children occurs in the areas of food and its consumption, television viewing, the daily use of clothes and their initial selection, bedtimes and toys. Finally, areas of conflict which had not originally been considered are identified. After describing parental views on parent/child conflict the paper concludes with some possible applications of the data. In order to make the point clearer, I will now consider relevant research.

RELATED RESEARCH

From a discourse analysis standpoint, literature related to arguments or conflicts between parents and children is not abundant. Although studies concerning parent and child conflict abound in the areas of developmental and clinical psychology, much of the work is usually based on a behaviourist model, whereby children and families are identified as needing some sort of remediation if they fail to measure up to the 'normal' standard (Gard and Berry, 1986; Trickett and Kuczynski, 1986; Webster-Stratton, 1984; Haswell et.al. 1981; Gilpin, 1976). Despite this, within the developmental psychology literature there have been a number of studies conducted in naturalistic type settings which examine aspects of conflict such as noncompliance (Kuczynski et.al. 1987; Chapman and Zahn-Waxler, 1982); spontaneously occurring control interventions (Kochanska et.al., 1987); and behaviour management in supermarkets (Holden, 1983; Sanders and Hunter, 1984). In line with the behaviourist model, programs are available to help parents cope with and improve the behaviour of their children while in the supermarket (Barnard et.al. 1977; Clark et.al. 1977; Sanders and Hunter, 1984) and to improve parent/child relationships (Eyberg and Robinson, 1982; Griest and Wells, 1983; and Haswell et.al. 1982).

The issue of compliance is considered important from a developmental viewpoint, as well as from a parental and caregiver perspective (Marion, 1983). Toepfer, Peuter and Maurer (1972) indicate that compliant behaviour is deemed necessary and is valued by adults, who see it as important both for a child's safety and as a way of teaching society's 'prescriptions'. Johnson et.al. (1973) found that noncompliance accounts for one-third of all deviant child behaviours, while Peed et.al. (1977)

established that noncompliance is a frequent presenting complaint of children referred for psychological treatment. The definition of compliance varies across studies with different criteria being set for compliance to be achieved, as well as different times being allotted in which the child is allowed to exhibit the desired compliant behaviour.

In a study by Siegal and Cowan (1984) children evaluated a range of disciplinary techniques used by mothers in a variety of situations where a transgression had occurred. Wolfe et.al. (1982) asked children how they would deal with common parent/child conflicts if in the parental role themselves, and also to specify how their own parents would deal with the situation. In another study Forehand et.al. (1978; 123) examined maternal responses to child compliance and noncompliance in a clinical laboratory setting concluding that `nonclinic children are not totally compliant, and that parents of these children frequently respond less than optimally to their children's compliance/noncompliance'. The difficulty with the parental responses occurred when parents interrupted the child after the request was made but before the child could initiate compliance. In the light of this finding Forehand et.al. (1978) recommended that in parent training programs a five second delay should be observed before parents interrupted.

Taking a slightly different view, Marion (1983) believes that compliance is an important developmental issue and examines the literature concerning child compliance from two theoretical perspectives, social learning theory and the ethological-evolutionary model. Social learning theorists see a link between specific adult practices and a child's compliance, but make no distinction between learning prescriptions and a child's

willingness to comply. (Marion, 1983; 545). Social learning theorists also view the individual and society as being in conflict. On the other hand, theorists from the ethological-evolutionary model propose that children are predisposed to be obedient, believing that a child's willingness to comply is an important step in the socialisation process, and see a 'fundamental compatibility between a person and society' (Marion, 1983; 545).

On yet another tangent, literature within the area of developmental psychology demonstrates the prevalence of power assertion in the childrearing practices of normal families (Grusec and Kuczynski, 1980; Zahn-Waxler et.al. 1979; and Lytton, 1980). Collectively these studies suggest that parents draw from a large repertoire of control strategies that includes power assertion techniques such as punishment, force and unexplained commands. However, parents do use methods that are more cognitively based, such as reasoning and explanation (Kuczynski, 1984; 1061). Hoffman (1975) acknowledges that the child is often in the position of complying with adult discipline, as the parent exerts far more constraint on the child because of what he calls the 'parent-child power differential'.

Looking more closely at the concept of power that is discussed within the developmental psychology literature, it is evident that the parent is perceived as the power figure who rightfully has control over the child, with the ultimate goal a compliant child. Siegel and Cowen (1984; 1761) identify the type of relationship that effective parents have with their children, and the methods used to achieve this:

> Recent studies have indicated that the effective parent who has obedient children employs induction backed up by the occasional use of power assertion.

Power assertion is understood by Siegel and Cowan (1984) as physical punishment, and induction can be described as the process of a parent reasoning with a child and pointing out the harmful consequences of a transgression for self and others. The Siegel and Cowan (1984) study showed that regardless of age, children preferred the authoritative parent who used induction which was occasionally backed up by physical punishment, the authors agree that any situation, for example simple disobedience, may be seen to warrant power assertion as well as the use of induction.

Hoffman (1975; 229) defines the concept of parental power as:

> the potential an individual has for compelling another person to behave in a way contrary to his wishes..... This power differential is particularly crucial in discipline encounters, interactions in which the parent wishes to change the child's behaviour against his will.

Hoffman (1975) describes a mild discipline encounter as changing a child from one activity to another, such as from watching television to going to bed, while more severe types of discipline encounters would consist of deviant acts.

Moving away from the field of developmental psychology, French and Woll (1981) indicate the unequal status position that children hold when merely conversing with adults. French and Woll (1981) go on to demonstrate how resourceful children are in their ability to circumvent their restricted position, while at the same time displaying respect for the conversational restraints placed upon them by their parents. As well as acknowledging children's restricted conversation rights, French and Woll (1981; 171-172) indicate several 'rights' concerning conversation, that parents assume over and above those of children: for example adults can refuse to engage in conversation with a child or enforce silence upon a child. Adult rights are not restricted to adult-child

interactions; instead parents assume the right to intervene and curtail children's conversations with their peers if they deem it necessary. Speier (1976) also has identified the conversational rights of adults that operate in adult-child interactions, indicating the sanctions that follow if children fail to allow adults control over conversations. Children do not necessarily experience such sanctions as problems, as they develop and refine tactics to cope effectively with difficulties associated with their enforced inferior status. Ervin-Tripp et.al.(1984; 134-135) examined power and deference displays in the natural interaction of family members by isolating children's attempts to control others, concluding that 'In many respects, the structure of power and deference in adult life is prefigured in the families'.

Given this discussion of conflict, compliance and power relationships from the perspectives of developmental psychology and sociolinguistics, it is apparent that the issues involved are complex. However, from the research reviewed, I have extracted three interconnected points which I now discuss briefly using a post-structuralist orientation. These are the issues of power, child compliance and how we are positioned as individuals in society.

POWER, COMPLIANCE AND POSITIONING

Relations of power are interwoven within institutions such as the family, where they are visible in a multiplicity of forms besides punishment and prohibition. To Foucault (Gordon, 1980) power is internal to all relationships and rather than being 'owned', controlled or exercised by individuals such as parents, it is developed through interaction in a variety of relationships. Relations of power then, are constantly at work and are not confined to specific times such as when children are being

noncompliant. This emphasis on the relational nature of power is significant, as power is seen as a shifting relationship of force and resistance.

Within the family, power can be viewed as a relationship which is always characterised by resistance. It is not solely the property and domain of the parent. This means that wherever there is power, there is also resistance. Resistance to power is characterised by its diverse form, by its heterogeneity, mobility, transitory nature and 'should not be attributed to some unique locus of revolt' (Cousins and Hussain, 1984; 242). Resistances are formed at the point where relations of power are exercised, and language plays a significant role in this process. Both parents and children then, can be seen as exercising, or attempting to exercise, and resisting the exercise of power.

Such an understanding of the relationship of power between parents and children, leads one to view the issue of child compliance in a much broader perspective than that indicated by the study of isolated incidents and sporadic episodes of compliance/noncompliance, as is the tendency with the developmental psychology studies. These events need to be viewed _in toto_, that is within the network of social structures that make up the larger social order. Foucault (1982, 793) clearly makes the point that power relations are rooted in the system of social networks.

In order to come to an understanding of how we are positioned as individuals in society, it is necessary to analyse the role of language in the construction of individual subjectivity. Subjectivity is the process through which people make sense of themselves through experience. Language has a decidedly social nature, and as such, is the vehicle through which individuals

socially construct their knowledge of the real. The use of language colours or influences how subjects interpret the social world, as they use language to make sense of what they see as social reality.

Language is always situated within power/knowledge relations, and these relations determine who has access to particular language practices. It follows then that language is not neutral and that it produces and represents different understandings of the world. These different understandings of the world and the positions they represent are known as discourses, and are representative of the various forms of social power and material interests. Subjects are therefore always in a position to select from the subject positions, or different points of view that are available as discourse. In assuming a subject position, people are produced as subjects through the language or discourse that is available. The discourses with which people align themselves can represent conflicting points of view, hence the term multiple and contradictory subjectivity. Language then, constitutes subjectivity, and power is exercised through subject positions. Because discourses are always aligned with an ideological position in the form of various types of social power or material interests subject positions are aligned with the familiar and apparently 'correct' position.

I now present interview data from the on going study within this post-structuralist position.

INTERVIEWS

Advertisements were placed in community newspapers delivered to the southern suburbs of a large Australian city. Eighteen women with children four or five years of age responded and were interviewed. Each interview lasted between one and one and one

half hours. No males responded to the advertisements.

All the interviews were recorded, with the interviewer visiting the interviewee in the home situation. Fourteen of the women interviewed were engaged in full time home duty responsibilities, and the other four worked full time. The sample consisted of two women who were sole supporters, and one who was involved in a role reversal where she worked and the father cared for the child. One interviewee also had twin girls 4 years old.

Parents were encouraged to talk as much as they liked, and to elaborate on statements made by the interviewer such as "Tell me about breakfast time", and "Could you explain the normal bedtime procedure?". These general statements were used to elicit information from the parents, and if more information was required or clarification needed, the researcher requested the parent to expand on the relevant point.

Ten of the interviewees lived in suburbs which have a large proportion of government sponsored low cost housing. In these situations the income earner was unemployed, worked in an unskilled job, or worked as a skilled tradesman in industry. The other eight participants lived in what could be termed middle class suburbs. Income earners in this category owned their own business, were skilled tradesmen, or members of professions. Two of the women interviewed were in a situation where both they and their husbands worked full time, and two others were sole parents.

DISCUSSION

The themes of food, clothing, television viewing, bedtimes and toys were individually identified as sources of conflict and non compliance, these data will be incorporated in a general discussion of results rather than being dealt with as individual

themes.

It will be recalled that a subject position is a stance assumed by a speaker within a discourse, and that people are constituted as subjects through discourse. Further, subject positions selected by individuals are usually those positions with which they feel most comfortable and familiar. Given these presuppositions, the following discourses were identified in the interview data.

Working on the understanding that resistances are formed at the point where relations of power are exercised, most parents considered themselves as occupying the role of controlling their children in a variety of socially acceptable ways. Relations of power were visible in many daily routine tasks in which the children were involved. Meal times, for example were a regular trauma for some parents, who described a typical mealtime as 'chaotic', 'disgusting', 'disastrous','horrific', and as 'bedlam'. One parent indicated a situation in which a child was 'force fed' because he would not eat what the parent considered to be appropriate for the evening meal. The parent described the situation as one where she 'held the child's nose and stuffed the food in'. Another parent reported having to 'stand over her child and scream' to get her to eat anything for the evening meal. These parents adopted the subject position that they were ultimately responsible for their children, a position which included ensuring that the children ate what they considered to be an adequate amount of food. Both mothers justified their actions by maintaining that if their children were underweight, malnourished or ill, it was a reflection on their ability to care properly for their children. This subject position has important implications for further investigation in the area of the

construction of motherhood and mothering.

The construction of motherhood and the link with normal development of children has been investigated by Urwin (1985) and will be discussed only briefly here. In her study, Urwin illustrated how the influence of particular ideas from the psychology of child development have become in effect normalising apparatuses and orthodoxies. Using the concept of 'normalisation' associated with the work of Foucault (1980) and Donzelot (1979), Urwin argues that the birth of surveillance practices which are based on the identification of deviance has depended on forms of knowledge which delineate the 'normal' from the 'abnormal'. Similar forms of knowledge are currently used to identify children and families needing some sort of remediation process, with an assessment of needs based on a measurement against the normal standard. The result of this differentiation process has meant 'the construction of norms has become a basis for regulating the rest of the population' (Urwin, 1985; 165). Regulation of the population occurs both through the identification of deviants as well as through the use of preventive strategies which 'support particular orthodoxies and effectively 'police' entire populations' (Urwin, 1985; 165). Interview data obtained in this study reflected normative practices which act as functionaries in the construction of mothering generally. For example, magazine articles, books, newspaper articles and pamphlets support orthodoxies such as appropriate eating/dietary practices both inside and outside of the home, appropriate preschool and kindergarten experiences for young children, and the role of the mother in promoting children's development. Siegel and Cowen (1984) provide another example of an appropriate orthodoxy when they indicate that effective parents have obedient children, and

use power assertion as one means of achieving compliance with their children. The inverse of this assumption is that ineffective parents have disobedient, noncompliant or even deviant children. The authors also legitimate the use of power assertion as a childrearing practice.

From the interview data, an example of a normative expectation placed upon children was the eating of vegetables. A child refusing to eat vegetables was identified as an area of child resistance. Several parents indicated that children were expected to eat even those vegetables they did not like because "that was what the family was having for dinner". In terms of punishment and prohibition, a number of parents indicated they used bribes such as television viewing and sweets to encourage their children to eat what they felt was appropriate for the evening meal. Some children were unable to leave the table unless they had eaten their 'greens', while others indicated the food on the plate was to be eaten before dessert was offered.

The punishment and prohibition theme was evident in the tidying processes that parents talked about. Tidying toys and rooms was a common problem and parents indicated they used techniques such as television viewing or a visit to the park as incentives for children to tidy their toys. Keeping clothes tidy was another very common source of conflict. Most children needed constant reminders to pick up their clothes after removing them for a bath, and on the whole children were said not to be good at keeping their cupboards and drawers tidy. Some parents experienced daily conflict with their children over the choice of clothes, especially when items selected were inappropriate for the weather, obvious colour clashes, or when good clothes were selected for everyday wear.

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All parents believed it was their responsibility to teach their children manners while at the table, especially at the evening meal. Manners were considered a necessary part of appropriate participation in family and social life. Children from these families were allowed to be more casual with breakfast and lunch than with the evening meal. For example they were allowed to eat sandwiches for lunch while wandering around the house, but were expected to sit at the table and participate fully in the social ritual of the evening meal. The evening meal was usually a time when these families came together, and this may account for the higher expectation associated with it.

Another discourse with which most of the parents aligned themselves was an attempt to control the salt, sugar, additives, colourings and junk food intake of their children. The media constantly bombards families with the evils associated with an excess of these products. Because of exposure through the media, parents felt comfortable and reassured that they were acting correctly by limiting the intake of these foods. Nevertheless, parents indicated that application of the discourse frequently brought resistance from the children in a variety of forms. Parents revealed that children engaged in activities such as eating the sugar from the sugar bowl on the table, and persistently asking for foods that mothers were reluctant to let them consume in large amounts such as sweets, crisps, cordial based drinks, cakes and biscuits.

Those parents interviewed indicated that food shopping can be an extremely demanding task, and more than three-quarters of the parents experienced conflict and resistance problems with their children when shopping. Children characteristically engaged in behaviour that was unacceptable to parents, for example requesting

or simply taking from the shelves items such as sweets, crisps, biscuits and icecreams. Children continually tested parents by getting into and out of the shopping trolley, randomly selecting items from the shelves and putting them into the trolley (when asked not to), throwing tantrums when they couldn't have the items they wanted, running off and hiding, fighting with siblings, and running up and down the aisles while screaming. Two mothers also reported difficulty with children stealing from the shops, which brought them into a great deal of conflict with their children.

The use of language to provide subject positions for speakers can help to reinforce specific forms of behaviour. Children in families are given subject positions in language that influence and limit their range of perspectives in interpreting the world. Although the Ervin-Tripp et. al. (1984, 135) study was a small one, the conclusions reached included that 'family interaction patterns provide the training ground for later patterns of social behaviour'. Data from this study indicate several areas in which this may occur. In the early evening when father had returned from work and wanted to relax watching the news on television, children generally were reported as being 'silly, annoying or loud'. Mother was usually preparing the meal, and was at the same time responsible for supervising the children so father could watch the news. Some children constantly interrupted the process by exhibiting attention seeking behaviour such as yelling, running and jumping around the room and on the furniture. Such behaviour often led to a conflict situation between father/mother and child, which occasionally resulted in the use of power assertion tactics.

In two other cases, conflict occurred between two boys and their fathers over the selection of new clothes. Both boys preferred long shorts in very bright colours and singlet tops, and

both fathers objected strongly to these clothes, preferring their sons to wear boxer shorts and t-shirts. One father also objected strongly to his son's spiked hair cut. Preference for conservative rather than the fashionable attire and hairstyle was based on the notion that `boys don't wear those sort of things, girls do'. There was also general reference made by the fathers to alleged effeminate and homosexual tendencies associated with the wearing of such styles.

In the above examples, the subject position assumed by the fathers within the discourse was gendered. Access to specific types of subjectivity is not only regulated by power relations, but also by institutionalised social relations which often benefit groups on the basis of race, class and gender.

The pervasiveness of popular culture and its associated artefacts for this age group was revealed in the interview data. Parents reported that all children watched television daily and had particular program preferences. As a result of television viewing, some children requested visits to places of entertainment, family restaurants, and the purchase of cereals and toys that they had seen advertised. Many of the children had clothes, toys and books that featured media characters and several possessed large collections of one particular character, such as Mickey Mouse.

Another of the current orthodoxies or discourse positions concerns the regulation of television viewing for this age group. Mothers interviewed expressed a general concern about violence on television, with some indicating they would not allow their children to watch programs which contained any violence, including the news or guns.

OTHER AREAS OF CONFLICT

The data from the interviews revealed a whole grid of relationships between spouses, and between parents and grandparents. To achieve a full understanding of the power relationships operating within families, further analysis needs to occur in this area. Evidently there are very different discourses operating between spouses. All but one of those interviewed with spouses indicated conflict arose because of differences between spouse views and beliefs about child rearing practices. Differences in opinion occurred over appropriate discipline, especially the use of physical punishment, family rules, one spouse having higher expectations than the other, and one spouse not taking as much responsibility with the children as the other wanted. The situation with grandparents was similar, with two-thirds of the parents interviewed indicating they experienced conflict or significant differences of opinion with the child's grandparents. Grandparents were reported as giving unwanted advice concerning manners, toys, discipline, bedtimes and diet. Such advice was often resented by parents. Many parents also came into conflict with grandparents because they felt that grandparents overindulged their grandchildren by 'feeding them junk' such as sweets, crisps and softdrinks. The analysis of these relationships remains the task of another paper.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of interview data and the reconceptualisation of the problem of parent/child conflict in terms of the ways in which discourse constructs relationships, it is evident that there is much more going on in these situations than simple rule breaking and noncompliance. Children and parents

are constantly positioned in power relationships, with both groups participating in the attempted exercise and resistance of power. This means that there is a complex web of ever changing relationships to be investigated and analysed. The task now remains to record actual parent/child conflict situations in naturalistic settings such as the home and the supermarket. These situations require an in-depth discourse analysis, to identify how discourse creates conflict between parents and children. 2

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Endnotes

1. As the statistical data from the surveys is still under analysis, this paper will report only the interview data.
2. Such a project is the ongoing work in which the author is engaged.

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